

The Peaceful Option

Renewed peace talks between Palestine and Israel are in everybody's best interest **By Yu Lintao**

The efforts of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to facilitate peace between Palestine and Israel have paid off—somewhat, at least. After the top U.S. diplomat's six mediation trips to the Middle East within half a year, peace talks were finally resumed on July 29 in Washington D.C., after being suspended in October 2010 due to Israel's expansion of settlement activities on occupied Palestinian lands.

During their meetings, which Kerry described as "constructive" and "positive," Palestinian and Israeli negotiators agreed that substantial talks would be held in the next two weeks, either in Israel or the Palestinian territories. They also pledged to reach a "final-status" agreement over the next nine months.

The political structure and geostrategic map of the Middle East have changed dramatically in recent years. Observers said it is the right time to promote Palestinian-Israeli dialogue as it meets the needs of all parties. However, as leaders from both sides refused concessions on thorny issues including boundary determination and the construction of Jewish settlements, prospects for this new round of talks are not too optimistic.

The moment

Nearly three years have passed since Palestinians and Israelis held their last peace negotiations. The renewal of the talks can be credited first to the new U.S. secretary of state. Unlike his predecessor Hillary Clinton, Kerry shifted U.S. diplomatic attention back to the Middle East from the Asia-Pacific region. In the meantime, observers claimed the changing political situation in the Middle East is a more important factor in restarting the talks.

The turmoil in neighboring Arab countries further worsened the security conditions of



Israel, while its tough stance on the Palestinian issue in recent years has isolated Israel in the international community, said Liu Baolai, former Chinese Ambassador to Jordan.

The so-called "Arab Spring" did not improve Israel's geopolitical standing. Anti-Israeli sentiment continued to flare in Arab countries along with the regional turmoil.

The EU on July 19 proposed new guidelines for how it would do business with Israel. The guidelines require the EU and its members to cease any joint activity or fund-

ing with Israeli entities in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, or in the Golan Heights from 2014. The EU holds that those territories are not part of Israel.

Palestine's upgrade to a UN observer state last November put additional pressure on Israel at the international level.

He Wenping, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), said with the annual UN General Assembly in September drawing near, both the United States and Israel worry that Palestine might take more steps in

SIT DOWN: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (second left) hosts a dinner for Palestinian and Israeli negotiators on July 29 in Washington, D.C.



the UN to appeal for the international community to press Israel if it doesn't restart peace talks.

For Israel, returning to the table on one hand can enhance its natural alliance with the United States; on the other hand, it can ease pressure from the international community. In addition, resuming talks shows a gesture of goodwill to help stabilize relations with Palestine and improve its security situation.

For Palestine, Liu said, incumbent Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has

been dedicated to peace talks and the founding of an independent Palestine with territorial integrity all along.

With regional turmoil raging, the Palestinian issue was nearly marginalized. Abbas hopes to make substantial progress in the Middle East peace process through the resumption of talks by the end of his term, Liu added.

Yin Gang, a senior researcher on Middle East studies with the CASS, claimed that Washington believes it is the right time to promote talks as Palestine cannot get much support from regional countries amid ongoing turbulence in the region.

Syria cannot presently assist Palestine as Bashar al-Assad's regime is mired in civil war, and Iran's influence on the issue is also weakening, Yin said.

The current political situation and geostrategic map are so different from those of three years ago. After the "Arab Spring," many political strongmen in the Arab world stepped down. Divergence within the Arab world is widening, and it is far more difficult to form a joint force backing Palestinians.

U.S. calculations

The Middle East turbulence since 2011 has profoundly affected the United States' influence in the region as well as the security environment of its ally, Israel.

Zhao Jianming, a researcher with the Institute of International Relations at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, noted that regime changes in some of the countries have resulted in the decline of Washington's control over the region. The Middle East turmoil has directly threatened the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty and the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty, two of Israel's most important security guarantees.

If conflict between Palestine and Israel broke out again, it would be like adding fuel to the regional flames that even the United States could not put out, Zhao said.

An additional point Washington must acknowledge is that if it doesn't promote the peaceful and comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the piece of land would remain a hotbed for extremism and anti-Americanism, permanently threatening the national security and world leader status of the

United States.

Besides the sense of crisis, observers said, Washington's efforts meet its political needs.

Liu said facilitating peace talks would reconfirm the dominant position of the United States on the Middle East issue. In the last 22 years, Washington has been the dominant leader of Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

In addition, Liu said, while promoting Palestinian-Israeli peace talks could help improve the image of the United States in the region, it could also isolate its old enemy Iran, reducing the latter's voice on the issue.

However, acting as a peacemaker is not easy. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has gone on for more than half a century. It involves multiple complex facets including religion, ethnicity, sovereignty as well as territory.

Another problem, He said, is that Palestinians and Israelis are divided internally on how to engage in talks. Doves and hawks coexist in the Israeli parliament and public. Likewise, the hard-line Islamic Hamas movement and the moderate Palestinian National Authority coexist in Palestine.

Before the talks resume, the Palestinian side reiterated several preconditions including Israel's freeing of Palestinians jailed before 1993, freezing settlements on occupied Palestinian lands and negotiating on the basis of the 1967 border.

Though Israel released 82 Palestinian prisoners as a gesture ahead of the talks, Netanyahu refused to freeze Jewish settlements or negotiate on the basis of the 1967 border in a public letter to the Israeli people.

However, Liu said, the resumption of direct peace talks is worth cherishing in spite of the difficulties. The United States, which has an important influence on the peace process, should play a fair role in the talks.

For the sake of future generations and the prosperity of the Middle East, the leaders of Israel and Palestine have no choice but to shake hands, said He.

Relevant UN resolutions and the land-for-peace principle are the basis to fundamentally solve the issue, the researcher added. ■